



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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AGENTS UNCOVER LARGE-SCALE BLACK MARKET IN ILLEGAL SALMON

Federal and State wildlife law enforcement officials today concluded a 6-month undercover investigation which revealed a thriving black market involving chinook and coho salmon and steelhead trout from the Klamath River in California where spawning runs are critically low.

Forty-one individuals were to be arrested or indicted in Oregon and California for violations of state wildlife laws.

Special agents of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted the investigation with Oregon State police and wardens from the California Department of Fish and Game. Personnel from the Del Norte County and the Humboldt County sheriffs' offices also assisted in the operation.

Enforcement officials believe salmon and other fish are taken from the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation and its extension and sold along the coast from Seattle to Los Angeles and as far east as Albuquerque.

Under both Federal and State law, it is illegal to sell fish taken from the Klamath River.

"This activity, when considered with heavy ocean fishing and other pressures on the resource, threatens not only future runs of the species, but the future livelihood of both Indian and non-Indian commercial and sport fishing interests," said Secretary of the Interior James Watt.

Because of destruction of spawning grounds and overfishing, spawning runs of salmon are only 10 percent of what they once were. Last year under 40,000 adult chinook spawned in the Klamath River system which, despite reduced spawning habitat, can still accommodate several times that number.

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Federal and State agencies now spend almost \$4 million annually to rebuild the Klamath River fisheries.

"This illegal activity undermines this entire effort," said Watt. "The Department of the Interior is also a trustee for Indian tribes and we must protect fishery resources so that the Hoopa and Yurok tribes can legally harvest fish from the rivers that flow through their reservation. The continued value of that right will become meaningless if the rivers are emptied of fish."

In addition to apprehending sellers of fish, the enforcement action also involved the indictment and arrest of buyers including fish wholesalers and retailers and restaurant owners. During the investigation, agents discovered thousands of pounds of salmon left at public dumps and along major highways because of apparent spoilage before the fish could be sold.

Oregon officials are concerned that buyers in that State who knowingly purchased illegal Klamath River fish provide an outlet for other illegal fish taken from Oregon waters.

Fish and Wildlife Service agents are aware of more than 118,000 pounds of Klamath River fish that were sold during the course of their investigation. They point out, however, that the investigation lasted only 6 months and probably uncovered only a small percentage of the total traffic in Klamath fish.

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